

But...

Luke 22:14-62; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11

Palm / Passion Sunday. It is probably the most confusing Sunday in the Christian liturgical year – an almost two-faced approach to worship that occurs every year on the Sunday before Easter. On the one hand, it is practically “Easter Celebration, Part 1.” The mood is often festive with the waving of palm branches helping us recreate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Often church choirs (at least those that are large enough to have choirs) prepare special pieces that almost always involve the word “Hosanna!” That’s Palm Sunday.

But “Palm Sunday” is also “Passion Sunday” – the Sunday that leads us into Holy Week. It is the Sunday that we contemplate what it really means when Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem, when we remember how those shouts of “Hosanna!” so quickly turned into cries of “Crucify him!” It is the Sunday when the lectionary asks us to read the Passion Narrative – which if fully read today, would have amounted to nearly two full chapters from Luke’s gospel (Luke 22:14-23:56). In a tradition, like Church of the Brethren, that has generally not emphasized observance of Good Friday, it is perhaps the best time we have to meditate not only on the life of Jesus, but on his death as well. That’s Passion Sunday.

How we navigate and understand these diverging meanings and traditions says a lot about our faith. Thinking about that task, I’ve kept coming back to a single tiny word that features prominently in today’s texts for Passion Sunday...

“But.” On its own, this word means absolutely nothing. In context, however, it is commentary. It is meaning. It is faith. Let me explain...

The importance of this single word is perhaps most noticeable and apparent in the Psalm. In verses 9-13 of Psalm 31, the Psalmist holds nothing back in naming the gloom in which he exists. In just five verses, we hear of his distress, his wasting away from grief, his sorrow and sighing, his failing strength, and his misery as his bones waste away. He is the

scorn of adversaries, a horror to neighbors, and an object of dread to acquaintances. He confesses that people flee from him in the street, that he is a broken vessel like one who is dead, that there is terror all around him as many whisper and scheme and plot to take his life.

Then comes that magical word in verse 14 – “But...I trust in you...you are my God...my times are in your hand. ” One commentary states: “By means of the small word ‘but,’... the ‘great nevertheless’ of faith, the psalmist gives testimony against all evidence to the contrary: ‘But I trust in you, O Lord...’ It is a determined statement of faith – perhaps even a defiant statement of faith, in the face of suffering and sorrow and death.” ...Perhaps more than anything else in the scripture, this single word illustrates the nature of real faith – what it means to be a human being fully trusting in God.

The text from Philippians similarly hinges on the word “but”, telling us that Jesus was in the form of God and equal with God, but emptied himself and took human form, humbled himself even as a slave, and became obedient all the way to his death on a cross. It is one of the earliest hymns and statements of belief in the Christian faith, as those words communicate the essence of the incarnation – Jesus was in the form of God and equal with God. As such, anything and everything was possible for him. He could have avoided the events of Holy Week. He could have taken a pass on the cross. But – and there it is again – he didn’t. Jesus instead chose downward mobility and full humanity – and all that comes with it, even – and perhaps especially – death.

We see this decision born out repeatedly in the gospel passion narrative. At his last supper with his disciples, as he is sharing the cup with them, Jesus says “This is the cup of the new covenant, but even here at this table is the one who is betraying me.” When a dispute arises among the disciples about who is the greatest, Jesus tells them that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, but it wasn’t to be so among them, for he was

among them as a servant. On the Mount of Olives, he prayed that the cup of suffering would be removed from him, but not his will be done, but God's. Shortly thereafter, one of his disciples tries to resist those who came to arrest Jesus and strikes off an ear with his sword, but Jesus says, "No more of this!" and healed him. All told, the word "but" occurs 15 times just in the portion of Luke's gospel that we read today...

"Well, that is all very interesting and everything," you may say, "but...why does it matter? What difference does it make to my life and faith how many times a word is used in the gospel?" That answer is easy – absolutely none. What does matter, and what may make a difference, is that we find ways to practice and to embody the meaning of that little word – "but" – for in that word is the essence of faith.

If we are paying attention, the word "but" in the passion narrative, is a gospel opportunity – a chance for good news to reframe and reinvigorate the valleys and ironies and difficulties of our lives. It provides us the chance to reframe our experiences, our expectations, and our faith. It is, as a commentator wrote, "an opportunity to resist that easy move from Palm Sunday to Easter – to resist being, 'a resurrection people but not a crucifixion people.' It presses us to sit with the fact of Jesus' suffering."

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to a hero's welcome. But...he doesn't stop there. He keeps going. He keeps riding, all the way into the depths of our being, into the violence and despair and betrayal and loneliness of our lives. He keeps riding all the way to death – that final destination that hangs over all of us and all that we love.

But...we know that isn't the end of the story. And every time we claim the cross we participate in that "great nevertheless" of faith. And that is good news indeed! Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

April 10, 2022      Hatfield Church of the Brethren